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Contemporary perceptions of social work: macro practice in the profession

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ABSTRACT

This study provides an updated understanding of the public's perception of social work in a Midwestern U. S. context, with an emphasis on how the public views macro practice as part of the scope of the profession, the tasks of social workers, and an exploration of the factors associated with attitudes about social workers. Findings suggest a positive perception of social work as a helping profession. While respondents reported a greater awareness of the comprehensive nature of social work roles, including macro-practice roles, than previous studies, participants still reflected a lack of knowledge around about some of the specific tasks that social workers perform.

KEYWORDS

Macro practice; public perception; social work attitudes; social work roles

Historically, social work in the United States (U.S.) has roots in both direct and community-based practice (Austin et al., 2016; Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014; Specht & Courtney, 1994; Wenocur & Reisch, 2001). Yet macro practice social work – practice that focuses on the "big picture" level, such as community organizing, policy advocacy, or planning – has diminished across the profession in the U.S. (Association for Community Organization and Social Administration [ACOSA], 2018). Only a small number of US social work students are choosing to enter macro practice (ACOSA, 2018), faculty and students reporting diminished support within social work programs for macro practice coursework (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014), and relatively few social workers work in macro positions (Council on Social Work Education, 2019). In recent years there have been repeated calls by North American social work scholars and activists for a re-balance of micro and macro social work practice (see ACOSA, 2018; Austin et al., 2016; Fisher & Corciullo, 2011; Reisch, 2016; Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014) and the need to promote macro practice in the interest of social justice (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; Reisch, 2016). While most of the recent attention on macro practice has focused internally within the discipline, the perception of the field of social work among people outside the discipline may also affect the balance

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of macro and micro social work within the field. This paper explores the public perception of social work in the United States with a focus on how social work is understood to include macro practice as part of its domain, which, in turn, can inform both how the field shapes its messaging to the public as well as how schools of social work can recruit potential social work students.

Background

Contemporary public perceptions of social work in the United States

The field of social work has long been concerned about public perception of the profession (Condie et al., 1978; Dennison et al., 2007; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; Legood et al., 2016; Sharpley, 1986). Although the public in the US has a fairly positive view of social workers, when researchers examine the nuances of public perception, there is a continuing public misperception of the scope of social work as being somewhat narrowly focused on direct practice types of roles (Argüello et al., 2018; Condie et al., 1978; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; Staniforth et al., 2014). This in turn may impact the number of students enrolling in macro-practice concentrations.

Over the years there have been several studies of the public perceptions of social work, with more attention on public perception by researchers outside of the U.S. (Kagan, 2016; Staniforth et al., 2014). The three main contemporary studies of the general public's perception of social work in the U.S. are Condie and colleagues' 1978 study, a study by LeCroy and Stinson in 2004, and a follow-up study to LeCroy and Stinson (2004) by Argüello and colleagues in 2018. Condie and colleagues' 1978 study of the general public's perception of social work, using a random sampling, door-to-door survey methodology in the western U.S., found that the public had a greater awareness of social work than a prior study in the 1950s, though the general public's definition of social work was predominately associated with child protection and child welfare roles. They also found some evidence that respondents who had a personal connection with a social worker reported more accurate knowledge of the profession and the roles of social workers.

LeCroy and Stinson framed contemporary scholarship on public perceptions of social work in the U.S. with a nationally representative random digit telephone survey conducted in 2004. While the authors found a moderately positive attitude toward social work, survey respondents expressed misunderstandings of the requirements and roles of social work practitioners. Many respondents recognized a wide array of professional possibilities for social work, yet most expressed a rather narrow view of the primary role of practitioners, and most often viewed social workers as child protection workers (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004).

As a follow-up to this study, Argüello et al. (2018) conducted an online survey of Californians' perceptions of social work as a discipline and as a profession, using a sample recruited from an ongoing panel of research participants that is representative of California. However, the demographic characteristics of this sample were not reported, which makes the findings difficult to compare to other studies. The survey instrument for this study was informed by both LeCroy and Stinson (2004) and Dennison et al.'s (2007) study of perceptions of social work among students. The authors found that the public has a fairly positive view of social work, yet there continued to be a persistent association with direct practice social work and less identification with macro-practice roles. Additionally, similar to Condie and colleagues' 1978 study, respondents assessed social work as less effective and less prestigious than other mental health professions, even though the market demand for social workers is increasing (Argüello et al., 2018). Argüello and colleagues' study, along with the earlier studies, were positioned as exploratory and descriptive studies, with none emphasizing an exploration of factors associated with the public's knowledge and perception of the discipline at large.

The complexity of public perception

The public's perception of social work has not been necessarily grounded in facts about the profession (Argüello et al., 2018; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). Being acquainted with a social worker has been found to positively influence an individual's perception and accurate knowledge of the profession as a whole (Condie et al., 1978), though little is known about how specific relationships with a social worker, such as a personal connection or a professional association, influences one's perception or knowledge of the profession. Additionally, the way in which individuals are positioned in society also may influence their experience with and perception of social workers. In one of the few studies that explores the perceptions of particular groups, Williams et al. (2015) found that African-American community members had a narrow view of social work, were not likely to seek help from a social worker for mental health issues, and were unlikely to associate social work with social justice roles.

Media coverage may also impact and limit an individual's perception of social work and negative exposure may be detrimental to the public's trust in the profession (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; Reid & Misener, 2001; Staniforth & Beddoe, 2017; Zugazaga et al., 2006). Compared to the United Kingdom (UK), Reid and Misener (2001) found that the portrayal of social work in newspapers in the US, was more positive than those in the UK. In New Zealand, a media analysis of social work across 5 years illustrated narrow and challenging coverage of social work in the context of removing children in crisis situations (Staniforth & Beddoe, 2017). In the U.S., articles about social work in the context of education, mental health and gerontology received favorable

reviews. However, child welfare coverage in both countries was more likely to be portrayed in the media negatively. This finding has become particularly relevant across the last few years. Similar to other high-profile cases around the country (see Day, 2011), Minnesota has experienced an increased focus on the child protection system after the death of a young boy in rural Minnesota (Stahl, 2014) which has brought a spotlight onto social workers in this field. This spotlight, in turn, may influence the public's narrow perception of social work as synonymous with child protection and child welfare.

The public's perception of social work can potentially impact recruitment for schools of social work. In 2007, Dennison and colleagues explored the perception of social work across undergraduate students at a large state university. In general, respondents reported a negative view of social work based on the perception of low salaries. However, students who had an affiliation with a social worker were more knowledgeable and had greater interest in social work as a major (Dennison et al., 2007).

Our intention is to move the general understanding of the public's perception of social work forward by providing an updated understanding of the public's perception of the field of social work in the U.S., with an emphasis on their perceptions of the scope of the profession, the tasks of social workers, their impression of social work in comparison to other fields, and the factors that influence attitudes about social workers. Additionally, our aim is to explore how the public viewed macro practice as part of its general conception of social work. Finally, we explore the public's views on how social work might improve its image in the general public. The research questions for this study included the following: (1) How does the general public in Minnesota describe social work?; (2) How does the general public in Minnesota perceive social work as a discipline as well as the role of social workers in contemporary society?; (3) How does the general public in Minnesota view macro practice as part of social work?; and (4) What factors are associated with Minnesotan's attitudes regarding social work?

Methods

We used a cross-sectional survey to explore the public perceptions of social work at four 6-hour shifts at the University of Minnesota's Driven to Discover (D2D) Research Facility at the 2017 Minnesota State Fair, which was attended by nearly two million people over 12 days in August and September (Minnesota State Fair, 2019). This was one of 37 rotating studies at the Minnesota State Fair in 2017 which enrolled over 16,000 research subjects in projects ranging from cancer prevention to language development to technology use (University of Minnesota, 2019). In the past decade, the State Fair has become an increasingly common way for medical and social researchers to recruit diverse participants from the general public, and more than 50 articles

have been published using data collected from participants at the D2D Research Facility.

Sample and procedures

Potential participants were invited into the research building by volunteers from the diverse array of studies taking place. Participants in our study had to be over age 12 and read and write in English, though this paper only reports on participants aged 18 and over. Each participant who was interested in our particular study was assigned an iPad with the survey uploaded onto the Qualtrics survey platform. They sat at tables with other participants, though their iPads were not visible to others. The University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board had waived the requirement for a written consent form for our study, though participants had access to copies of the overview of the study, contact information of the PI and the consent form, and by proceeding with the survey were indicating consent. The survey took approximately 10–20 minutes to complete. In appreciation for participation, each participant was offered the chance to spin a giant wheel to win a prize valued under five dollars.

Instrumentation

We developed a 20-item questionnaire informed by past studies of the perception of social work, particularly LeCroy and Stinson (2004) and Staniforth et al. (2014), though we included additional items as well. The survey consisted of Likert scales, multiple-choice questions, short response questions and the collection of demographic data. To begin the survey, respondents were asked to complete three short-answer items. These items included: "Write the first phrase or sentence that comes to mind when you hear the words 'social worker,'"; "What do social workers do?"; and "What types of places do social workers work?" The next three sections included options for a yes or no response toward the types of places social workers work, tasks that social workers perform, and traits of social workers. Each item had a list of options for response. Respondents were given options of places, tasks, and traits that typically align with social work as well as a number of each that are not favorable such as "inefficient" or outside of the profession such as working in "fast food preparation" in order to understand respondents' full understanding of the nature of the profession. Additionally, the survey items covered roles and tasks of social workers that typically align with direct practice and macro practice, which allowed for deeper analysis of the distinction between the public's knowledge of different aspects of practice.

We next asked respondents to answer "How would you react if a family member was choosing each of the following careers" by providing a list of

career options and a scale of 1–5, ranging from 1 = not at all positively to 5 = very positively. Additionally, we asked respondents what they thought was the basic level of education required for social workers ranging from none to a doctorate degree, whether or not social workers should be licensed, and if they learned about social work from a number of sources. We also asked a short-answer question of "The field of social work is always looking for ways to improve what the public thinks about social work. What are your ideas on how social workers could improve the public perception of social work?" To assess respondents' attitudes toward social work, we offered an eight-item scale with response options on a scale of 1–5, with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. After assessing for internal consistency, four items were included in our scale for regression analysis. These items included: "Social workers are important for addressing social problems," "We need more social workers," "Social workers counsel as well as psychologists," and "Social workers help change social policies." The Cronbach's alpha was 0.61. For each respondent, we created a composite score consisting of their responses to these four items.

We also collected data on the individual characteristics of participants including age, zip code, gender, ethnicity, race, level of education, and experience with social work. For each item, we utilized listwise deletion to handle missing data. Participants were asked to give their age in years. The zip code variable was recoded by county and then dichotomized to include whether or not respondents lived in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis or Saint Paul) or elsewhere. Gender included options of female, male and other. Ethnicity included: Hispanic or Latino or Non-Hispanic or Latino. Race options included: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, Multiracial or Other. Level of education included: some high school, high school diploma or GED, associate's degree, some college with no degree, bachelor's degree, and graduate or professional degree. This variable was dichotomized, whereas participants who reported less than a bachelor's degree were coded 0 and people who had a degree or higher, were coded 1. For experience with social work, the individual items included: I have a social work degree or am a social work student, I have worked professionally with a social worker, I have a family member or close friend who is a social worker, I do not have personal or professional knowledge of social work, A close family member or I have used social work services, and other.

Data analysis

To answer the first research question, the research team utilized thematic analysis to look for patterns and distinctions in the data from the open-ended questions (Patton, 2015). One member of the research team first

reviewed the data to explore commonalities across the responses. Next, each response was gathered under similar themes and noted distinctions across respondents' answers. A second member of the research team then reviewed the data analysis and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Microsoft Excel was used to categorize the qualitative data, as well as store the data analysis. The qualitative data provided insight into how Minnesotans describe social workers, the discipline as a whole, and differentiation between direct practice and macro-practice descriptions. Additionally, we used SPSS version 25 for data management and to answer the remaining research questions. Descriptive statistics were estimated to explore the general perceptions of Minnesotans regarding social work as a discipline and career option. Finally, multiple regression was used to examine factors associated with the reported composite attitude toward social work score.

Findings

Sample characteristics

The study enrolled 812 fair goers ages 18 and over to participate in the study. Demographic data of participants are summarized in Table 1. The mean age of

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 812).

Independent Variables	Mean	SD	n	%
Age	39.3	15.67		
Residence in Twin Cities				
Twin Cities			422	51.97
Outside of the Twin Cities			360	44.33
Declined to Answer			30	3.69
Ethnicity				
Hispanic or Latino			30	3.69
Non-Hispanic or Non-Latino			770	94.80
Declined to Answer			12	1.50
Race				
American Indian or Alaska Native			9	1.11
Asian			40	4.93
Black or African American			4	0.49
White			698	85.96
Multiracial			26	3.20
Other			25	3.08
Declined to Answer			10	1.23
Gender				
Female			546	67.24
Male			253	31.16
Other/Missing			13	1.60
Education				
Bachelor's Degree or Higher			504	62.07
Less than a Bachelor's Degree			308	37.93
Experience with Social Work				
I have a social work degree or am a social work student			50	6.16
I have a family member or close friend who is a social worker			231	28.45
A close family member or I have used social work services			176	21.67
I have worked professionally with a social worker			220	27.09
I do not have personal or professional knowledge of social work			292	35.96

participants was 39.3 years (S.D. = 15.67), with a range of 18 to 87 years old. A majority (67%, n = 546) of participants identified as women, with 31% (253) identifying as men, and 2% (13) identifying as other. Approximately 95% (770) of the sample identified as Non-Hispanic or Latino, with 4% (30) identifying as Hispanic or Latino, and 1% (12) choosing non-applicable. In terms of race, the largest group of respondents was 86% (698) White, followed by 5% (40) Asian, 5% (38) Other, 3% (26) Multiracial, and 1% (10) declining to report. According to the World Population Review (2019), this racial breakdown is relatively similar to the demographics of the state as a whole, with a slightly lower percentage of individuals who identify as Black or African American. Approximately 62% (504) of respondents reported a bachelor's degree or higher. Almost 52% (422) reported living in a county in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

Public descriptions of social work

Respondents were first asked to write the first phrase or sentence that comes to mind when they hear the words "social worker." Approximately 39% of respondents immediately identified some form of helper. The next most common response at 12% were positive descriptions of social workers including "caring," "wonderful," and "benevolent." An additional 7% initially identified characteristics of the job that are difficult, including "overworked," "discouraging," and "burnout." Other phrases of note included "umpire," "professional caregiver" and "master of the system."

The second open-ended question asked respondents, "What do social workers do?" Similar to the first question, the majority of respondents often used the word "help" to describe what social workers do. In general, respondents identified that social workers either provide (usually including the word help) direct services (53.2%, n = 432) or act as the liaison to connect people with services (24.5%, n = 199). The next largest categories were child protection services (10.1%, n = 82) and provide therapy (8.5%, n = 69). Only 4.4% (n = 36) responded that social workers work on a wide variety of areas as well as types of practice. Very few respondents noted social justice advocacy and no respondents identified macro-practice tasks of community organizing or activism. In answer to this question, one respondent noted, "lots of things like mental health, public health, child protective services. It is kind of a white middle-class field with a white middle-class perspective though." While another noted, "make change, support, care superheroes!"

The third open-ended question asked respondents, "What types of places do social workers work?" Half (50.5%, n = 410) of the respondents noted some type of government work including social services, child protection, welfare or noted the county or state specifically. The next two most common notations were schools or education at 48.9% (n = 397) and hospitals, healthcare or

clinics at 48.8% (n = 396). Approximately 7.8% (n = 63) identified that social workers work anywhere and everywhere, in all parts of society.

Public perceptions of social work

When asked to identify areas where social workers work (Table 2), respondents identified high levels of agreement for a diverse array of areas with the highest including "child abuse and neglect" (98.25%); "working with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds" (97.18%); and "working with older adults" (97.78%). The lowest categories of agreement included "international development" (62.07%); "college athletics" (37.32%); and "sports teams and athletes" (32.39%). This is an interesting finding for social workers involved in the emerging subfield of social work in sport (Gill et al., 2017).

Respondents associated a variety of tasks with social workers (Table 3). The tasks selected most frequently included "connect people with resources" (98.15%); "advocate for people to get resources" (96.67%); and "conduct research about social problems" (92.36%). Interestingly only one out of two respondents indicated that social workers "Provide therapy to individuals" (56.90%). Additionally, 55.17% suggested that social workers "Decide if a parent loses the rights to his or her child." When compared to previous studies (see Argüello et al., 2018; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004), respondents in

Table 2. Areas of social work.

	Yes %		Yes%
Child Abuse & Neglect	98.15	Nonprofit and Government Organizations	90.64
Working with Youth from Disadvantaged Backgrounds	97.78	Health Care	89.78
Working with People with Disabilities	97.78	Social Policy and Advocacy or Lobbying	87.93
Working with Older Adults	97.78	Community/Neighborhood Organizing	84.61
Domestic Violence	97.41	International Development	62.07
Mental Health/Mental Illness	96.18	College Athletics	37.32
Homelessness	96.18	Sports Teams and Athletes	32.39
Substance Abuse/Addictions	95.94	Transportation Industry/Trucking	28.20
Parents and Parenting Issues	95.57	Fast Food Preparation	13.05
Criminal Justice system/policy/prisons	95.07	Retail Sales	11.08
Refugees and Refugee Resettlement	93.97		

Table 3. Tasks social workers perform.

	Yes %		Yes %
Connect people with resources	98.15	Organize community groups	85.59
Advocate for people to get resources	96.67	Lead group therapy sessions	83.62
Conduct research about social problems	92.36	Conduct psychological tests to test for disorders or intelligence	70.94
Investigate child abuse or elder abuse	91.26	Provide therapy to individuals	56.90
Speak out about injustice	89.04	Decide if a parent loses the rights to his or her child	55.17
Help communities solve problems	88.79	Give legal advice	29.56
Lead or manage community programs	88.55	Diagnosis injuries	19.09
Influence social policy	85.96	Prescribe medication	12.81

Minnesota had a higher rate of agreement with all areas of social worker tasks, including macro-oriented practice such as "Lead or manage community programs" (88.55%), "Influence social policy" (85.96%), and "Organize community groups" (85.59%). This finding diverges from previous findings on the public perception of social work in that when prompted, respondents report a greater awareness of the comprehensive nature of social work tasks.

Respondents were asked to identify whether or not social workers met a number of characteristics. The top three areas of agreement for social worker characteristics were "caring" (98.52%), "hardworking" (98.03%), and "trustworthy" (96.67%). Negative characteristics had lower levels of agreement such as "inefficient" (19.33%), "well-paid" (15.39%) and "unfair" (8.13%). Additionally, when asked how respondents would react if a family member chose a job from a list of careers (Table 4), social workers landed in the middle with 77.59% suggesting reactions of very positive or somewhat positive. Interestingly, despite social work being one of the largest growing professions, less than half (44.21%) indicated that they would feel *very* positively about a family member choosing social work as profession.

Respondents were asked about the minimum level of education and licensure that should be required of social workers as well as personal and professional experiences with social work. Over half of the respondents (53.57%) believed that social workers should have a minimum of a bachelor's degree with another 41.38% suggesting a master's degree. In addition, 75.12% of respondents believe that social workers should be licensed like doctors, nurses, or teachers. Finally, most respondents learned about social work primarily from personal or professional experience (66.13%) or someone told them about social workers (65.02%). Less than half of participants learned about social work from media sources including social media (36.82%) or magazines (32.27%). This finding is of note based on the ways in which participants suggested that social work should improve the public image.

Table 4. How would you react if a family member was choosing each of the following careers?

	Very Positively or Somewhat Positively (%)
Scientist	88.92
Medical Doctor	88.67
Engineer	87.56
Nurse	87.19
Pharmacist	86.82
Teacher	85.47
Lawyer	77.59
Social Worker	77.59
Psychologist	77.22
Web Developer	75.74
Police Officer	63.67
Military	57.88
Clergy (Examples: minister, imam, monk, nun, pastor, priest, rabbi)	57.14
Fashion Designer	53.94
Politician	41.87
YouTube Personality	25.25

The last open-ended item asked respondents to suggest ways in which social workers could improve on public perception. Approximately 28% suggested that social workers increase public awareness by engaging with the larger community through a media campaign with a clear message (18%) or an education campaign about the comprehensive nature of the profession (18%). Additionally, 12% suggested that social workers need to just continue to do better and be more effective. One respondent noted, "Social workers are the people that I feel get stuck in the middle of some tough situations. That makes it hard to change perception."

Attitudes regarding social work

Respondents were asked about their agreement with eight statements about social workers (Table 5). Approximately 87.3% (n = 709) noted that "Social workers are important for addressing social problems." Almost six out of 10 (n = 487) respondents believe that "Social workers work mostly as counselors or therapists with individuals and families." Fortunately, only 59 (7.3%) individuals thought that "Social workers waste taxpayers' money."

We also examined a number of demographic and personal factors, including age, gender, race, education, residence in the Twin Cities, and experience with social work, that may correlate with a respondent's attitude toward social work (Table 6). The demographic and personal factors combined with experience collectively had a significant influence on attitudes ($F(11, 721) = 8.96$,

Table 5. Attitudes about social workers.

	Strongly Agree or Agree (%)
Social workers are important for addressing social problems	87.32
We need more social workers	77.46
Social workers help change social policies	72.41
Social workers work mostly as counselors or therapists with individuals and families	59.98
I may need help from a social worker in the future	51.11
Social workers counsel as well as psychologists	44.83
Social workers are mostly liberals or leftists	28.33
Social workers waste taxpayers' money	7.27

Table 6. Summary of multiple regression analysis for variables predicting attitudes toward social workers (N = 812).

Variables	β	SE	Sig.
Age	0.008	0.006	0.212
Twin Cities	0.043	0.189	0.818
Race (White)	0.026	0.289	0.928
Gender (Female)	0.498	0.201	.013
Level of Education (Degree/Graduate)	0.29	0.208	0.061
I am a social worker	1.918	0.396	<.001
Family or close friend	0.507	0.236	.032
Myself/close friend/family has used social work services	0.355	0.246	0.149
Work professionally with a social worker	0.885	0.148	<.001
No personal or professional knowledge of social work	−0.165	0.281	0.556

$p < .01$, $R^2 = .120$). Individually, the only demographic characteristic significantly associated with differences in public perception was gender. On average, females' attitudinal scores were 0.50 points higher than males when controlling for other variables ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < .05$). While level of education trended toward significance ($p = .061$), it did not reach the $< .05$ level used for this study. As expected, those who were social workers on average reported almost two points higher than their peers who did not self-identify as a social worker ($\beta = 1.92$, $p < .001$) Similarly, our results illustrate that having a close friend or family member who is a social worker ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$) or working professionally with a social worker ($\beta = 0.89$, $p < .001$) is also associated with more positive attitudes about social work. Non-associated factors were age, residence in the Twin Cities, race, whether the respondent or someone close to them had used social work services, and no knowledge of social work.

Discussion

The findings from the current study build on previous studies on the public perception of social work (See Argüello et al., 2018; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). Similarities, differences, and expansion on previous work provide a critical frame for moving forward with the promotion of the comprehensive discipline and specifically the recruitment and support of social work students. This study illustrated a public perception that social workers help, but the specifics of that help remain vague. In general, respondents in this study described social workers as *helpers* with two main roles of (1) direct service provision to individuals in need of help; and (2) to act as the connectors to access resources and opportunities. Few respondents initially described macro-related roles or tasks, such as policy advocacy, community organizing, or program development.

When offered the opportunity to describe where social workers work, there was a general notion of social workers in the public sector, with far fewer identifying the private or nonprofit sector. Similar to other studies, social workers were viewed rather favorably with over 90% of respondents suggesting that social workers are caring, hardworking, trustworthy, practical and highly trained. Additionally, in general, participants responded favorably to social work as an option for a family member's career. Study participants' generally positive descriptions and attributions of social work lay the foundation for building up the profession in the eyes of the public, yet the lack of specificity of the profession continues to impede the public's holistic understanding of the larger profession. This reinforces contemporary scholarship on social work and the public perception (Argüello et al., 2018; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; Staniforth et al., 2014).

When compared to prior studies of the public perception of social work, this study also adds to current scholarship. Although macro-practice areas of

social work were not initially cited as social work tasks, when prompted, respondents in this study reported a fairly high awareness of both direct practice and macro-practice areas of social work. Once survey respondents were offered choices, participants tended to suggest greater levels of agreement with the areas in which social workers work and tasks that social workers perform than previous studies (Tables 2 and 3). For example, at least eight out of 10 participants suggested that social workers work in a variety of areas, which included areas more synonymous with macro practice, such as social policy advocacy and community organizing. This finding is notable as past studies have not found such high levels of public awareness of macro practice social work tasks (see Argüello et al., 2018; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). However, at a time when these macro-practice tasks are increasingly important for the profession (Reisch, 2016), these macro-practice tasks continued to be less commonly identified than direct practice tasks.

The fact that the public continues to associate social work with direct practice more often than macro tasks is not surprising and potentially reflects the priorities in the current political economy. For decades, policy makers have aimed to minimize the welfare state through largely neoliberal policy priorities such as individualism, privatization, managerialism and a new system of governing poverty (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2018; Schram et al., 2010). The focus on efficiency in the welfare state has zeroed in on social workers as the conduit between those seeking services and welfare resources, even though this work is just one component of the larger profession. Macro practice social workers on the other hand play a critical role in elevating the institutional and societal structures that create and impact the need of services in the first place but have received far less recognition in both the public and academic sphere (Reisch, 2016; Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014) and remain a smaller portion of the social work profession (Council on Social Work Education, 2019).

There continues to be misperceptions of the specific nature of social work roles which suggests the importance of public education. Although social work was viewed positively and respondents reported a greater awareness of the comprehensive nature of social work roles than noted in previous studies, participants still reflected a lack of knowledge around some of the specific tasks that social workers perform, including both direct and macro tasks. For example, approximately half of the respondents did not identify the provision of therapy as a task that social workers perform, despite the fact that over a quarter of all graduates work with individuals with mental health issues and almost 70% note that their clients are dealing with a mental health diagnosis (Council on Social Work Education, 2019). Additionally, our respondents cited a much higher percentage of agreement that social workers conduct psychological tests at almost 71%, whereas in an earlier national sample (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004) under 50% of respondents agreed with the statement. Over half of the respondents agreed that social workers decide if

a parent loses the rights to his or her child and almost 30% suggested that social workers give legal advice. Each of these findings demonstrated high agreement with tasks that social workers do not perform, illustrating a lack of knowledge regarding specific tasks of social workers, particularly in regard to the legal system.

This study contributes to current scholarship in its inclusion of factors that may impact the public's attitudes toward profession. Although there was some early evidence to suggest that acquaintance with a social worker might be associated with greater knowledge of social work (Condie et al., 1978), the current study finds that different types of relationships are associated with attitudes. For example, those who reported a close personal or professional relationship with social workers reported significantly more positive attitudes toward social workers. This illustrates the importance of relationships between social workers and the general public for promoting the profession. Additionally, there appears to be a gendered component whereby women hold significantly more positive attitudes than men toward social work as a profession. This highlights the need to break down misperceptions among men regarding social work in order to continue to diversify the profession through the recruitment of future social work students, which might be bolstered by promoting macro-practice roles too.

Interestingly, for a profession that promotes social justice and the distinction of being one of the only professions with social justice in the code of ethics (Reamer, 2013), only four (0.5%) respondents noted social justice in their descriptions of social workers. Three of these respondents were social workers themselves. When later asked directly if social workers speak out against injustice, almost 90% agreed with the statement, though this was not the first thing that came to mind for nearly every participant. While many social workers understand social work's underlying value of social justice to be its most distinguishing characteristic, our findings demonstrate that this is not a description that holds wide importance or understanding in the public. This lack of immediate association with social justice makes this an interesting item particularly in the current U.S. context. Recently, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2020) has reinforced its commitment to ending racism and promoting social justice advocacy. Similarly, social workers have been called to step into current social and racial injustice work across the country, particularly in the context of policing. However, some social workers have called for caution as the profession moves forward with these partnerships (Foiles, 2020; NASW, n.d.). Social work's advocacy efforts as well as the larger popular media may influence the public's perception of social work's connection with social justice both now and in the future.

The factors that may impact public perception strongly align with the respondents' suggestions for how to improve the public's knowledge and thereby image of social work. Respondents recommended the need for

a media campaign that will educate the general public with a clear message around the comprehensive nature of the profession. Additionally, the factors that influence attitudes about social workers suggest the need to introduce the general public to social workers themselves. NASW and the NASW Foundation initiated a public education campaign to educate the wider public about what social work is, who social work serves, and the comprehensive nature of the profession itself (NASW Foundation, n.d.). Influencing the public's perception and understanding of social work as a whole may be particularly relevant for macro practice. For example, a recent study found that macro practitioners often do not identify publicly as social workers for a variety of reasons, ranging from fear of licensing boards to the public's misperception of social work (Lightfoot et al., 2016). Thus, the general public might have even more limited awareness that workers active in their own communities are, in fact, trained social workers, particularly macro-level social work leaders who do not publicly identify with the profession. Continued efforts of public awareness campaigns about social workers must make an extra effort to introduce the general public to macro practice social workers specifically in order to continue to expand the public's awareness of the comprehensive nature of the profession.

Limitations

There are a few limitations of note for this project. First, although this study moves the literature forward by examining the factors associated with attitudes toward social work, which was notably absent in earlier studies, the Cronbach's alpha on the attitude scale was satisfactory, but still somewhat low. Future research must utilize more rigorous methods of examining factors that influence public perceptions of social work, such as developing more reliable scales. Additionally, responses in the areas of social work suggest an acquiescence bias. Respondents tended to report higher levels of agreement across all areas of social work than previous studies (see Argüello et al., 2018; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004), including areas such as fast food preparation and retail sales. This level of agreement with areas clearly outside of social work suggests general acquiescence on behalf of some respondents rather than critically thinking about each item. Further, there is an overrepresentation of women in this study, which limits its generalizability. However, the gender imbalance in this study was very similar to the gender imbalances in the samples of both the Condie et al. (1978) and LeCroy and Stinson (2004) studies, so the results of this study can be compared somewhat to earlier studies. In addition, while the study participants included a large majority identified as non-Hispanic white, this is fairly representative of the demographics of the state Minnesota. However, this does limit the generalizability of the findings outside of the region. Future studies should target the public

perceptions of diverse respondents when assessing how individuals of all identities and geographies perceive and understand social work.

Conclusion

The current study provides critical insight for the social work profession. First, the profession continues to be viewed fairly positively in the public with a greater awareness of the comprehensive nature of social work than previous research. Yet, the public's association of social work with the specific tasks of the profession continues to be limited without additional prompting. Additionally, generally the public continues to be less familiar with the macro-practice tasks than direct practice tasks, despite higher levels of agreement with macro tasks than in previous studies. Secondly, relationships between social workers and those outside of the discipline are critical to bettering the public's knowledge of social work as a profession and growing the recruitment efforts of future social workers, which is especially critical for those interested in promoting macro practice social work. Finally, increasing the awareness of who social workers are, where they can and do work, and the tasks they perform will build the capacity of the profession and make a greater impact when working both with individuals and communities.

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